

PAGE 23

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HEADLINE: NORTH KOREANS PROPOSE REDUCTION OF TROOPS IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH

BYLINE: By CLYDE HABERMAN, Special to the New York Times

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BODY:

North Korea today proposed vast troop reductions by both North and South Korea, and said that it would cut its own forces by 100,000 before the end of the year to "open up a practical breakthrough."

The North Korean plan called for a phased cutback that would leave each side with armed forces totaling less than 100,000 by 1992 - a fraction of the numbers now massed along one of the world's most heavily fortified borders. The proposal would also require the United States to withdraw all of the 40,000 troops it stations in South Korea, along with any nuclear weapons that it may store there.

According to American Government estimates, North Korea has 838,000 men and women under arms, compared with 598,000 for the South. The North also enjoys a great numerical advantage in tanks, artillery, multiple rocket launchers and naval forces and, to a lesser degree, in air power.

Awaiting Democratic Change

The North Koreans urged that the two Koreas and the United States hold talks in Geneva next March on ways to put its plan into effect.

The choice of March seemed to have been made with South Korea's roiled domestic politics in mind. In late February, President Chun Doo Hwan is supposed to step down and yield to a successor who, under democratic steps taken in Seoul early this month, would be chosen through direct elections.

In the North Korean statement, the only direct reference to the South's political situation was a comment that "as long as the North and the South preserve such huge armed forces as today, peace and security cannot be guaranteed even if a democratic government desirous of peace and reunification is established in South Korea."

The statement was carried by the North Korean press agency, monitored in Tokyo.

There was no immediate reaction from the South Korean Government, but an official noted that a key recommendation - three-way talks in Geneva - was essentially a rehash of an idea that the North first offered in 1984. Each time the suggestion has been made, Seoul has rejected it.

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Washington Supports 2-Way Talks

South Korea fears that it would be shunted aside in a three-sided conference, suspecting that the North's true motive is to deal directly with the United States. Instead, with Washington's support, it has proposed two-way talks involving only the Koreas, but says it would accept four-sided negotiations, to include China, and even six-way discussions, to also include the Soviet Union and Japan.

'At this point, we might be very skeptical,' the South Korean official said of the latest Northern plan.

A United States official said that today's proposal was largely a reworking of ideas that, in some instances, go back more than 30 years, to the period immediately following the 1950-53 Korean War. Among the more familiar elements, he said, was the call for a reduction in overall troop strength to less than 100,000 on either side of the Korean demilitarized zone.

Most Significant Statement

Despite the initial skepticism, it was the most far-reaching and detailed North Korean proposal to reduce tensions in several years - certainly since talks on several dominant issues broke off in early 1986. It was also the most significant statement by the Government in Pyongyang since the United States said in April that it was prepared to take steps to improve relations, including the easing of a near total ban on trade, if the North resumed talks with the South and sent a team to the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul.

Why the North Koreans chose to act now was not clear, but the South Korean official said that the considerations probably included Seoul's domestic political troubles and long-stalled negotiations on whether Pyongyang should be allowed to share the 1988 Olympics to a limited extent.

'Every time South Korean politics becomes a little unstable, they make this kind of proposal,' he said.

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